

# Introduction

## Imaginarities of the Future

**Hannah Ackermans and Lieke Schrijvers**



The cover image of this issue shows “Children at the Sea” by well-known Dutch photographer Willem van de Poll, which is, ironically, ‘undated’. It shows a younger generation looking into the unknown, the sea that cannot yet be conquered by the subject nor seen in the photograph. In this manner, the photograph visualizes this *Junctions* issue as encompassing the variety of imagining the futures. Whatever the future might entail, what ties the articles together is primarily the *process* of looking at the future rather than the content on the imagined futures. Accordingly, the special issue ‘Imaginarities of the Future’ holds a tension in its phrasing. The word ‘imaginarities’ holds the connotation of fiction, implying existence only in the minds of their creators, whereas there is a connotation of fact when it comes to ‘future’, which describes that which is not yet real, but will be. The aim is thus multiple, we provide a critical reflection of past ‘imaginings’, such as analyses of dystopian literature, preservation of heritage and influence of technology on social relations. In response to our call for papers, we saw exactly how varied these imaginings are and can be and where thinking about the future in and of the humanities can take us.

Reflecting on the theme ‘Imaginarities of the Future’, we opened the call for multiple interpretations, including research about the past and about fictional depictions of the future. In times of political instability we see many contributors engaging with contemporary political circumstances as well. Many scholars of the humanities are engaged with cultural productions, such as literature, architecture or other forms of art. However, this issue in particular highlights how a critical analysis of such productions can contribute to broader societal debates that are currently playing out in our contemporary world. The humanities have a crucial role to play in the future of academia, which becomes evident in the many submissions we received in response to the call for papers. At the same time it is necessary to evaluate about the current affairs of the Humanities, by showing how a group of young academics takes on the theme of ‘Imaginarities of the Future’. ‘Imaginarities of the Future’ oscillate between depictions of the future, and the politics which shapes the future, between distance and engagement in research. It shows the multiple ways in which the future can be imagined, as well as what the humanities have to offer to enable such imagining. In the following text, we reflect on two recurrent themes in the articles, that of the salience of technology in imagining the future, and the methodological strategy of using fiction novels to convey imaginaries of a real -life present and future.

## **OF CYBORGS AND MEN**

While relating to various sources in analysing how the future is imagined, what all these articles seem to have in common is that they use technology to envision alternative futures. We discern two strands of research that are valuable to look into in relation to our themed issue: imagining the technology of the future and the practical reality of technology in the present.

### ***The Cyborg***

In considering the future of the humans in relation to technology, the human is no longer necessarily at the center. Marek Susdorf, for example, analyses the musical project Björk's *Biophilia* (2011) in this issue, which is positioned as a change in perspective on the factual world, in which the 'man over nature' trope is replaced by a posthuman framework. This posthuman framework is mainly located in the field of feminist philosophy and provides tools to further unravel the relations between humans and machines as well as the influence of technological advances on the concept of the human (Haraway, Braidotti). With the rapid development in technology nowadays special attention is given to the interrelatedness of human and machines (Braidotti 2013). Although Donna Haraway wrote the influential ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ decades ago, the questions and themes continue to be of relevance in speculating about the future and the past (Haraway 1991). The cyborg is located on this intersection of humans and technology which so many scholars focus on, as it is “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”

(1991, 149). Thinking about the cyborg leads us to ask where does the ‘human’ end and the ‘machine’ begin?

We can reflect on this question by researching state-of-the-art technologies and imagine their implications for the future. In the fourth article that we present, Ntiana Fragkoulidi analyzes Microsoft’s chatbot XiaoIce to speculate on the blurring dissimilarity between humans and computers, a topic that we are used to dealing with through science fiction. She helps fill a void in current research in which “Oddly, [...] many non-fictional accounts of how technology develops still treat the material apart from the social” (Jasanoff 2014, 2). How can the humanities respond to the rapidity of technological developments? As such an overarching question of this issue is why and how it is that the future is imagined in mainly technological terms, and which underlying assumptions about progress or decline can be identified. Imagining this in relation to philosophical questions is necessary, while at the same time we have to regard the weight of using technologies in everyday life in shaping the present and future.

### ***The Human***

We enact the future in our lived reality. Our use of technology in our everyday reality can be seen in both work environments and public spaces. Paul Schmidt’s article in this issue analyses a rather new development in music, namely ‘soundwalks’, in which people are asked to listen to a specially composed musical piece on their headphones while walking through the city. Based on interviews, Schmidt shows how influential such music can be on the perception and experience of the contemporary city, and asks how this can be related to the Baudelairian figure of the ‘flâneur’. In this practice, a public space is influenced by technology and gives an alternative perspective on the everyday reality of walking in a city.

In our own work environment of academia, technology plays a central role. Although occupied in searching for truths, scholars should instead reflect on the performative elements in how we preserve these facts looking toward the future. This reflects the objectives and methods of the Digital Humanities, a central research theme in the faculty. One of focus areas of Utrecht University’s Digital Humanities Lab is to “appl[y] technologies to model different research domains in the humanities”. This ties into one of this issue’s articles: Following this theme, Maranke Wieringa considers the facts from the past and present of preservation and archiving to consider the threats and opportunities for archiving the digital in the future. In doing so, she considers the past and present as facts while the future can only be speculated upon, yet the perspective she adopts is that of the future in which the facts of the past needs to be uncovered. We have to reflect on the technological practices in our everyday lives to invest in preserving the past for the future. Merlijn Veltman similarly considers how the past plays a role in our present and how

our preservation strategies now determine how the past and present will be regarded upon in the future. Going beyond the factual storage of information, Veltman considers how preservation strategies play a role in the way in which we consider our cultural heritage. This builds on Utrecht University's Digital Humanities Lab goal to research "the cultural and social impact of new media and information technologies and the challenges they pose". Together these articles not only research elements outside of the humanities, but also impact "the development, design and support of technical infrastructure for research in the humanities".

One of the leading strands of inquiry into the imaginaries of the future is thus how the use of technology both shapes and reveals possible future.

## **BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION**

Although the distinction between fact and fiction is a productive one, the two cannot not be separated. Imaginaries of presents and futures do not exist in isolation, but rather in interplay with real life development. Fiction can be utilized to make an argument on various aspects of real life, of which we introduce three examples reflection of history, ideology, and politics respectively.

Thomas Piketty's bestselling nonfiction *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* draws from early nineteenth-century novels by, among others, Jane Austen, to describe the class and financial system at the time to argue that we are currently returning to a patrimonial capitalism. In this issue, Lotte Kremer's historical research on a fictional story shows that the ways in which the future is presented in fiction reflects the time period in which it was imagined. Fiction can thus be a valuable source in investigating the affairs that occupied the writer and his contemporaries. Through researching fiction, this research also enables us to see parallels between the ways in which people thought about the future in the past and the ways in which we consider the future in the present.

Whereas Kremer researches fiction in a more or less detached manner, other scholars present a clearer political stance. Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim's *Dreamscapes of Modernity* describes the interplay between depictions of future in science-fiction and actual development of technologies. They acknowledge that the social plays a very big role in science-fiction, but that research into the development of the future focuses solely on technological advances. Although associated with facts and truth, fiction can be a necessary tool for politics as "conceptual frameworks that situate technologies within the integrated material, moral, and social landscapes that science fiction offers up in such abundance" (Jasanoff 2014, p.3) Similarly, Thalia Ostendorf positions *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood as an alternative world and in her article she questions how the story world functions as a possible future, as a dystopia, and how the concept of

enjoyment is maneuvered in the fictional society. In this way, she highlights that “imagination liberates the mind to rise beyond the constraints of the possible” (Jasanoff 2014, p.321).

Various political ideologies have advocated for political literature. Proletarian literature, for example, is seen as literature that can be used as “a weapon in the class struggle” (Farrell 1942, n.p.). Literature can reflect and reinforce societal structures as well as make an attempt to deconstruct them : “Literature generally reflects life. It limps, even crawls, behind events. This is especially so in periods of great social crisis and of historic convulsion” (Farrell, 1942, n.p.). Kaspars Reinis’s contribution in this issue takes a political approach to literature, going beyond the analysis of depiction to make a political argument. Using J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Reinis criticizes the current political discourse organised around the structure of “in the name of”. In this way, the strength of fiction is both in foregrounding political issues and warning against the fictionality of political issues in current discourse and the real life consequences this can have. This differentiates from the previous examples as it goes beyond the situatedness of literature in a historical context in which it is written, and instead takes literature as a more timeless insight into returning political issues.

## ARTICLES

The order of the articles in this issue moves loosely from past to future, fluctuating between fiction and nonfiction case studies and between articles that take a distance from and ones that take an imperative stance towards the future.

The future has been imagined and reimagined throughout time. In the first article, “Short Skirts, Telephonoscopes and Ancient Locomotives: Albert Robida’s vision of the twentieth century”, Lotte Kremer analyzes the science-fiction illustrations in Albert Robida’s *Le Vingtième Siècle* (1883) in relation to Robida’s own historical context. Studying the fashion, architecture, technology and general culture in the illustration, she provides answers to the central question: how does Robida’s imagined future fit within his time?

A different engagement with the past is shown in the second and third articles, which engage with the preservation of the past through future-oriented technologies. Maranke Wieringa’s “The Fragility of Digital Media Content. On Preservation and Loss: Sketching the Pilgrimage of Future Scholars to Recover Our Digital Vellum” states that preservation of media content is increasingly problematic with the rise of digital media. The article functions as a thought exercise to chart possible problems that future scholars might encounter when scavenging the digital archives.

Whereas Wieringa focuses on the practical side of preservation, Merlijn Veltman considers preservation from a memory studies perspective by analysing the preservation of cultural heritage. Through the case study of the virtualisation of Syrian cultural heritage, “Remembering the Old World: An Analysis of the Interaction Between Virtual Heritage and Cultural Memory” considers how preservation practices reformulate identity away from nationality and towards a global identity and the subsequent democratisation of cultural memory.

Technology is used to preserve the past as well as to shape the future. By utilising the case study of Microsoft’s chatbot XiaoIce, Ntiana Fragkoulidi’s “Posthuman Relationships Social Assistants as Virtual (Girl)friends” argues that private interactions on social media platforms allow for the formation of a personal and personalised interaction between human user and social assistant. This way, the article demonstrates the extent to which the partial disembodiment of humans on online social media spaces and the partial embodiment of virtual or software girlfriends blurs the relationship between humans and computers and allows for the creation of a virtual posthuman relationship.

In addition to real-life applications, the role of technological and societal development has also been imagined in speculative fiction which play out societal anxieties and have evolved into sets of “what if?” scenario’s that show us our possible futures. Thalia Ostendorf argues that enjoyment is an often overlooked but telling element to these world-formations. In “Enjoyment After the End of Times: The Role of “Enjoyment” in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, she takes Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and illustrates that speculative fiction creates a space for critical speculations and experimentations on the perceived lack of alternatives for the (neo)capitalist system, even if the speculated-on consequences are disadvantageous.

Kaspars Reinis takes a literary approach as well when he analyses future frontiers and their relationship to the state of exception, where the sovereign suspends the normal rule of law in the name of security. In “Future Frontiers and the State of Exception – an Agambenian reading of J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*”, he reads Giorgio Agamben’s theory on the state of exception and J. M. Coetzee’s 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* comparatively and argues that the state of exception of the current political discourse is organised around the structure of “in the name of” and warns the reader to resist this discourse.

The article of Paul Schmidt then analyses contemporary sound walks, and the influence of music on the perception of the contemporary city scape in “Strolling through Soundscapes: Remystifying the City with Personal Audio.” He connects the practice of walking through the city to the nineteenth-century concept of the flâneur to ask what the potentials are of the soundwalk to remystify the city for its inhabitants nowadays.

Finally, Marek Susdorf analyzes Björk's project *Biophilia* to showcase the application of feminist new materialism in artistic practice. In "Björk's *Biophilia*: A Musical Introduction to Feminist New Materialism", Susdorf problematizes the relationship between subject and object within a situation of scientific and artistic inquiry and ultimately pleads for drawing inspiration from Björk to imagine new possibilities of connection, trans-species 'communication' in order for us to discover new potentialities and possibilities within art and science.

In addition to the academic articles in this issue, two book reviews are provided. Lenna Lammertink's review of "Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century", by Marc Matera, presents a history of black presence in interwar London. This rich decolonial, anti-racist and anti-imperialist narrative provides an alternative history of London necessary to reimagining the future. Marta Montebovi reviews "Global Inequality: A New Approach to Globalization" by Branko Milanovic. Milanovic's analysis of globalization and world economy does not only critically reflect on the establishment of capitalism, but his perspectives provide fundamental questions for thinking about the future.

To summarize, a fundamental part of all disciplines of the humanities is to engage with the question of what human society might look like in the future; to dream of how it should be, to face what it will be, and to warn against what it could be. The pace of change in modern, technologically-driven society, can often leave scholars bewildered by phenomena such as post-truth politics, or confronting the reality that society may not have changed as much as, or in the way that, we hoped. Therefore, in this issue we offer the opportunity for thorough reflection on imaginings of the future and their effect on actual future building.

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## ILLUSTRATION

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